

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

One F in fraud

When Effing Jeff finds some unauthorised payments on his credit card bill, he calls David Robinson immediately. What he found will worry card holders everywhere

"What's all this, then?"

"What's what?" I ask.

"These ****ing things on my ****ing bill!" says Effing Jeff. I haven't sent Jeff a bill for a few months, so I can only presume that it's not my bill he's talking about.

There are many different kinds of customer. At one extreme there's the likes of Mr Nice who, as well as always saying 'please' and 'thank you', gives you clear instructions as to what he wants and pays every bill on time. Mr Nice knows exactly what kind of work is included in his service and maintenance contract and what is not. If he needs anything that's not in the contract he says so and even asks for a bill. If it's for a lot of small items, we never send one because a bit of give and take with a good customer never hurt anyone.

At the other extreme are the custards such as Effing Jeff, who think that just because he pays a service charge for looking after the main business system he's entitled to hold me personally responsible for any technology-related malfunction in his life, whether we supplied it or not. For the sake of decency I'll leave his expletives out of any further narrative; I'm sure you can work out where most of them would go, although I'd bet your F-count would still be short of the real thing.

FAX AND FIGURES

"What bill?" I ask, mustering up all my reserves of patience. "Credit card," he says tersely. In addition to thinking that he owns us because he's a big customer, Jeff also assumes that I'm clairvoyant. "Fax me a copy," I say. Although nobody uses faxes much any more, I don't bother asking him to scan it and send the JPEG as an email attachment. Jeff doesn't do email; it requires a mastery of a number of small details. Jeff doesn't do detail. Mind you, neither does he do faxes – he gets a "girl" to do it.

"Has some ****er stole my identity?" he growls. I must say I wouldn't fancy acquiring Jeff's identity; it would be like waking up to find you'd become Bernard Manning or John Prescott.



On receiving the fax, I call him back to get the details of the problem. "It's them four in the middle," he says. In the middle of the third page of his card bill are four identical items, all for £19.99, on the same day, labelled with a reference and a phone number. "You're sure you didn't buy these?" I ask. What he said next meant yes.

So I called the number on the bill for him and asked what the charges were about. The company that answered does credit and security checks on car ownership. I was put through to the internet security person. He, in turn, looked up the transactions and said they looked odd. For a start, each one should have had the enquirer's name and address because they always follow up an online enquiry with a printed copy of the result. There was no legitimate address for these four transactions. Interestingly, he didn't say there was *no* address.

He thought that the enquiries, all relating to expensive kinds of car, were done by someone looking to 'clone' a stolen vehicle with a fresh identity. If you want identity details for that purpose, you need them to be accurate and for a car that doesn't have any problems, such as one with unpaid finance or an insurance write-off. It would be equally important not to use your own identity when making such a search, as the patterns would be a dead giveaway as to what you were up to.

CARD SHARP

The big question was how the perpetrator had got hold of Jeff's credit card details. Surely, to spend money online like that, you'd need a name, address, card number, expiry date and CV2 number? And to get all that would require a fair degree of carelessness or a major security breach. Which, in relation to EJ, would be of interest to me, as he'd hold me responsible, and that was not a pleasant prospect.

Jeff cancelled his card and got the card company to issue a new one. He'd have got the "girl" to do it, but credit card companies will only deal with the card holder.

Fortunately, there didn't appear to be any other unauthorised expenditure. Which is actually quite weird. Think about it; if you were a criminal and you had every detail you needed to use someone else's card, you'd be off on a short but spectacular internet spending spree. Particularly with a big credit limit like Jeff's.

Checks of Jeff's PC and the rest of his network revealed no trace of a keylogging program or other spyware. Phew! I don't think Jeff was convinced, though.

He wanted an explanation, so on my next visit we called the card company's security department to see if they could throw any light on it. A man took all the details.

A week later, Jeff got a letter with an apology (of sorts), saying that the four charges – a mere flea bite on Jeff's mighty bank balance –

had been refunded. So we called the card security people again.

"Ah," said the man. "I can assure you that this was definitely *not* done by identity theft."

"So the computer system isn't to blame?" I asked, and he reiterated that it wasn't.

THE NUMBERS GAME

"So how was it done?" I asked, and this is more or less what he told me.

The criminals generate credit card numbers randomly. "What use is that?" I hear you ask. That's what I asked. The man said they test the numbers using certain 'known websites' that have poor security checks. The criminal chooses a website that allows you to put in the credit card details, usually for an online service rather than physical goods. The site then approves the transaction and asks the user to confirm, and the criminal answers 'No'. You now know that the card number works but, having spent no money, you leave no trace.

Apparently about one in a hundred numbers actually gets a positive result. You can then use the known working number to acquire a legitimate service. "But what about the address and CV2 number details?" I asked.

"Well," said the man, "there are quite a number of sites that ask you to enter those details but don't actually check them."

I don't know how true this is, but that's what I was told. If it is correct, I'm amazed that such lax checking is tolerated as it must cost the credit card companies a fortune. It does explain the absence of the spending spree, though, as for most sites with properly structured security the scam wouldn't work.

Still, all's well that ends well, and Jeff is a happy bunny once more. He even bought me dinner, which was perhaps his way of saying thank you without actually uttering the dreaded words. I did notice, however, that he paid in cash! **CS**

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